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La Boheme

Opera by Giacomo Puccini

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Brian James Myer, Matthew Hanscom, Kirk Dougherty, Colin Ramsey. All photos by Pat Kirk.

La vie bohémienne tugs at the heartstrings

The seasoned opera goer may be excused for yawning at the thought of attending yet another production of *La Boheme*. But there is a good reason that it is perhaps the most beloved opera in the repertoire and one of the most accessible to those new to opera. When the curtain rises and the first melodic strains wave over the audience, even the most blasé will relax and enjoy some of the most beautiful music ever written. San Jose Opera hits the bull's eye with its most recent revival of Giacomo Puccini's war horse with a beautiful production sung and acted by a marvelous cast.



Sylvia Lee, Kirk Dougherty.

La Boheme transports us to the source of the bohemian life style, turn of the (20th) century Paris, where financially impoverished but intellectually rich poets, painters, musicians, and philosophers huddle in cheap lodgings. Puccini captures the lives and loves of these artists with unsurpassed operatic genius.

The score moves from one highlight to another, and the best of the best includes a trifecta in the first act that sets the standard for lovers' first encounters. Sickly but beautiful seamstress Mimi loses her key in the dark and seeks help from neighbor, poet Rudolfo. As they feel around on the floor, their hands touch. He cries out the beautiful aria "Che gelida manina" (Such a frozen little hand) and proceeds to introduce himself as a man who lives in happy poverty but is a millionaire in spirit. She responds with the equally captivating "Mi chiamano Mimi" (My name is Mimi) in which she admits her loneliness passing time making artificial flowers that sadly have no scent. Then, fated to become lovers from their first encounter, they sing the lovely duet "O soave fanciulla" (Oh, lovely maiden), with a finish that soars into the heavens.



Vanessa Becerra, Matthew Hanscom.

The lead couple perform admirably. Kirk Dougherty's style is that of an emotive Italian tenor with a little extra pathos in his voice – somewhat akin to an American country singer. But his vocal quality is solid, and he deftly portrays the romantic, jealous, conflicted Rudolfo. Julie Adams, who alternates the role with Sylvia Lee, possesses a darkly hued soprano voice with range and warmth to meet the challenges of Mimi.

The production is beautifully mounted with sets by Kim Tolman. The beamed garret of the four artist friends is the setting for the intimate scenes, but the second act street scene outside the Cafe Momus is the liveliest. Here, vibrant soprano Vanessa Becerra performs her show stopping Musetta's Waltz, "Quando m'en vo" (When I walk) as she tries to jilt her sugar daddy and reignite her relationship with painter Marcello, who is sung and played by baritone Matthew Hanscom with great lyricism and compassion. The stage is a kaleidoscope of vision and sound, with a massive number of performers deftly shifted around the stage by director Michael Shell and gaily costumed by Alina Bolovikova.



Kirk Dougherty, Matthew Hanscom, Brian James Myer, Colin Ramsey

By the final two acts, the haunting leitmotifs will be familiar to most listeners, and it seems that there is not much more the opera can offer. Then come the third act trio and quartet that make you wonder how the composer could create music that is so beautiful and accessible and at the same time so compositionally and lyrically complex.

The remaining principals also shine in bringing captivating interpretations to Puccini's music. The other two artist friends display increasingly deeper and darker voices with distinctive characterizations. Looking the clean cut and confident businessman rather than a bohemian, Brian James Myer's tone is rich and clear as musician Schaunard. Finally, Colin Ramsey acts and sings with dark slyness and humor as the blind and facially disfigured philosopher Colline. His tone turns mournful in "Vecchia zimarra senti" (Goodbye old friend) when he decides to sell his beloved overcoat to buy medicine for the dying Mimi. Conductor Joseph Marcheso extracts a full-bodied, lush sound from the orchestra of 50 or so.

La Boheme music by Giacomo Puccini and lyrics by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa is produced by Opera San José and plays at The California Theater, 345 South First Street, San Jose, through April 30, 2017.



another review by

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